

Have you ever heard the classic saying that goes like this: “Are you a hedgehog or a fox?” Or perhaps something like this was said at lunch: “the current President of the U.S. is a hedgehog!” What is the world does all *that* mean? Well, that’s all pretty interesting, and, as usual, there’s a backstory. I’ll start with some necessary background, and we’ll finish with this question: “Are you yourself a hedgehog or a fox?”

Hey, it seems that not very many Americans know what a hedgehog even *is*—that’s because this smallish creature is not native to the U.S. Here’s a description of the European common hedgehog: when it’s mature, this hedgehog is about ten inches long and weighs about six pounds. It has a coat of thousands of little brown and white spines, apparently not so prickly as porcupine quills but they’re still a protection from some predators in the wild. Hedgehogs are considered pests by many folks in areas to which they were exported over the past couple of centuries—like New Zealand. Still, hedgehogs are now the focus of some European conservationists, even though they apparently number in the millions there. Hedgehogs tend to hang out in parks and gardens.

In comparison, foxes are certainly more familiar to Americans, probably because they are found pretty much everywhere in the U.S., although many city-dwellers have probably only seen a fox in a zoo or in an animated Disney movie or on National Geographic specials on TV. So, how did these two animals—a hedgehog and a fox—get put together? Well, a Greek poet in antiquity started the ball rolling by creating this saying: “a fox knows many things, but a hedgehog knows one big thing.” That surely didn’t capture the public’s imagination. But centuries later British philosopher Isaiah Berlin picked up the idea.

Now, I’m not talking about *Irving* Berlin whose name you likely remember. No, *Irving* Berlin was the famous Russian-American composer who’s considered one the greatest songwriters in history, topping the charts numerous times in the mid-twentieth century with songs that are still pretty popular, like “God Bless America,” “Puttin’ on the Ritz,” “White Christmas,” and “There’s No Business Like Show Business.”

No, we’re talking here instead about *Isaiah* Berlin, who, like Irving Berlin, was a highly influential Russian Jew who emigrated to an English-speaking country and lived a very long life during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But this Berlin—I mean *Isaiah* now—ended up in Britain, not America, and became quite influential with highbrow intellectuals. Berlin spent many years teaching at Oxford, with a stint in-between serving the Allies in diplomatic appointments during World War II.

Here’s an overarching sense of Isaiah Berlin’s high reputation from an obituary in 1997 commemorating him in the British newspaper *The Independent*. “Isaiah Berlin was often described, especially in his old age, by means of superlatives: the world’s greatest talker, the century’s most inspired reader, one of the finest minds of our time. There is no doubt that he showed in more than one direction the unexpectedly large possibilities open to us at the top end of the range of human potential.” That’s quite an amazing summary!

But Isaiah Berlin’s most enduring impact on the general public is most likely an essay that he wrote that was published as a book in 1953. That book’s title was *The Hedgehog and the Fox*. Sound familiar? You see, Berlin revived that ancient Greek poet’s words and ultimately placed a number of famous people as fitting most closely in one category or the other...you know, as a hedgehog who “knows one big thing” or a fox who “knows many things.” It was the start of a sort of an intriguing parlor game, like charades.

So, who were some of the people Berlin identified as *hedgehogs* who “knew one big thing?” A short list includes the Greek philosopher Plato, Italian poet Dante, German philosopher Nietzsche, Russian novelist Dostoevsky, and political theorist Karl Marx.

Then we have Berlin’s parallel naming of some famous people as *foxes*, those who purportedly “know many things,” like the Greek philosopher Aristotle, English playwright Shakespeare, Russian writer Tolstoy, and Irish author Joyce. Remember all of this was published by Isaiah Berlin in the 1950s, and Berlin would

naturally be focused on his areas of interest, like philosophers and writers. But, wait a minute, is this framework of “hedgehogs and foxes” applicable to you and to me, in our real-world workplaces and lives?

Well, some think so! This idea has captured other folks beyond Berlin to go beyond a parlor game on a chilly winter holiday into an elevated importance about how we can helpfully think about people we may want to mimic...or maybe avoid! For sure, many political leaders have been analyzed and categorized—from Napoleon to Washington to Lincoln to Churchill to Reagan, all the way to later figures like Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders. Just for fun, go look at some of the opinions about this—you might be surprised! But here’s the question: does Berlin value hedgehogs or foxes more in his thinking? Well, what we can say for sure is that he built a life around knowing many things—like a fox!

And so it goes to business personalities, too, with folks like business-author Jim Collins of “Good to Great” fame weighing in. So, what do *you* think, say about Gates, Bezos, and Musk? That’s a point of the two categories, a fascinating task figuring out a key piece of what might have made some people successful!

But what really matters is this: how should we as Christians think and act—like a hedgehog or like a fox? Well, it seems clear what the answer is, but in a way that’s not necessarily the way the game is typically played. It seems the person who probably best defines which path a Christian should take is the writer of much of the New Testament—the Apostle Paul! And here’s the clearest possible sentence Paul could have ever written to make a Christian’s key position clear: “I know nothing...except Christ and Him crucified.”

Of course, that pretty much reveals that Paul’s approach was very much as a *hedgehog* at its core, perhaps complete with prickly spines! Yes, Paul “knew one big thing:” *Christ and Him crucified*. Indeed, the eternal destiny for *every person in the world* hangs of this hedgehog issue: *how do you respond to Jesus and the Cross?* No, it’s *not* hinging on Jesus the good teacher. *Not* hinging on Jesus the moralist. Instead, it’s hinging on Jesus’s substitutionary action at the Cross on behalf of everyone who would call upon His name! Christ and Him crucified—that’s the one ultimate *hedgehog* thing to know, timeless and powerful!

But it’s undeniable that Paul’s life demonstrates the life of the ultimate fox, too. Who else better knew every angle of the biases of brittle Jewish religionists? Who else better knew every angle of the legalist’s mind? And who else better knew the approach to the philosophers at Mars Hill? In all these ways, Paul was a foxlike dude—he very much “knew many things.” In fact, he wrote to the Corinthians that “I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.” Hey there, isn’t that being a “fox” to all people—and being that fox in service to his hedgehog of “knowing one big thing” about Christ and salvation? Pay attention, Isaiah Berlin: the hedgehog of knowing Christ and Him crucified trumps all the foxlike philosophers and philosophies “knowing many things!”

So, it’s pretty clear that a life choice between “hedgehog” and “fox” is a false choice. Of course, the two categories still do have great merit. In fact, they are very helpful, because each person must select which of the two must take a position of primacy over the other. Yes, Christians are to be both a hedgehog and a fox...but listen to this very important truth: the primacy, the foundation of the two options, is to choose to be a persevering hedgehog for Christ! The two-step path is clear: every person must first respond to the Gospel of the Kingdom of God to be the hedgehog that God wants them to be—to “know nothing except Christ and Him crucified.” Then all believers are to spend the rest of their lives learning by studying the Word and the teaching of the Holy Spirit (John 14:26) about how to have foxlike, multiple approaches to all the key facets of life: marriage, family, workplace, neighbors, and, of course, God and His Kingdom!

So, we started by saying we would finish with this question: “Are you yourself a hedgehog or a fox?” And for the Christian, the answer is: “I am both! First, I am a hedgehog in Christ as the persevering foundation. Second, I gain additional knowledge by being the fox God wants me to be in faithfully fulfilling every role He has appointed me to.” Now, isn’t that an amazing path? That’s better guidance than the thoughts of Berlin—that’s because it’s the power of Christ, made manifest in believers’ lives! *Yes, a foxlike hedgehog!*

## *A&A: Application & Action*

1. Is the key leader of your workplace organization more of a hedgehog or a fox? Which of the two is needed for your organization to thrive over the long haul? Explain.
  
2. What is your personal framework in life most like...a hedgehog or a fox? What are the ramifications of your choice? Be specific.
  
3. Are your local church's actions grounded in a hedgehog knowledge and proclamation of Jesus? If so, then is that hedgehog focus on "Christ and Him crucified"—or perhaps another perspective of Jesus, like "Jesus the great teacher" or "Jesus the social conservative" or "Jesus the social justice warrior?" Discuss.